目白大学　文学・言語学研究
第２号　2006年１月　83－100

The History of the Aloha Shirt

- Micah Box -

When I began teaching a course for the Japan Asian Studies Program at Mejiro University called *East Meets West, Culture at the Crossroads*, I was impressed by the many areas of our lives that have been strongly influenced by exposure to other cultures. Food, music, language, art, fashion, politics, and government are just a few notable spots on the long list of things in either the East or the West where you can easily see the influence of the other culture. Among all the examples we can cite, perhaps one of the most easily visible is the garment that has come to be known as the aloha shirt.

Hawaiian shirts have a long and storied history and there have been numerous stories and ideas about the origins of the Hawaiian shirt - known more popularly as the aloha shirt in Hawaii (Beanteacher). This paper will try to peel back some of the rumors, popular beliefs, and fables to bring you the actual tale of the evolution of the aloha shirt.

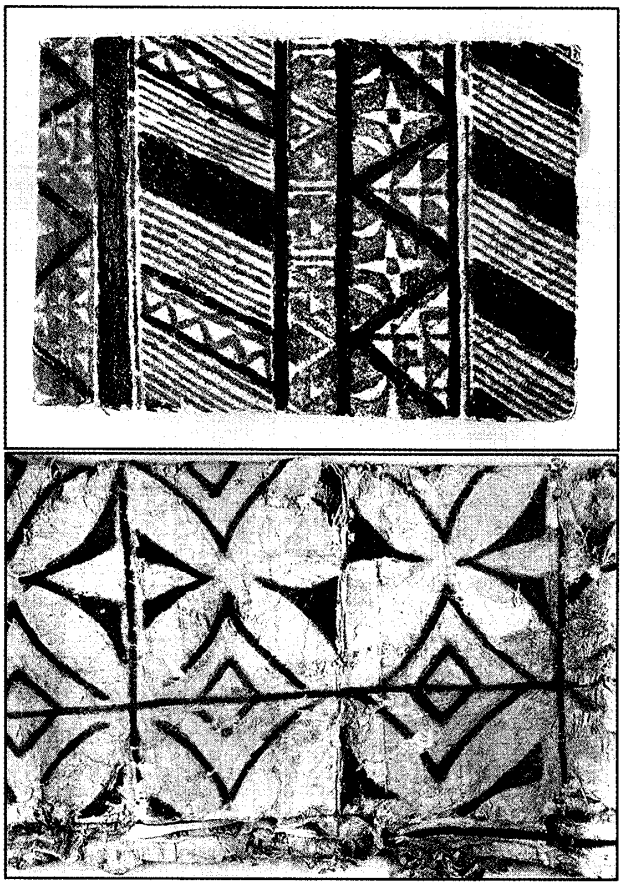
"Consider your aloha shirt. Was it designed in Japan, printed in New York, manufactured in Hawaii and sold in Chicago? Perhaps. But it could have been designed in Hawaii, printed in Japan, manufactured in Honolulu and sold in New York" (Foster, p. 4).

マイカボックス：外国語学部英米語学科教授

The aloha shirt is not only visibly influenced by both Eastern and Western cultures, it is arguably a creation based on a merging of clothing styles from both cultural arenas to meet the unique needs of a local population. Hawaii's many ethnic and racial groups are reflected in both the shape of the clothing and, perhaps more significantly, the motifs found in the fabric designs (Brown and Arthur, p. 10).

To fully understand the history of the aloha shirt, ti is important to understand a bit of the history of clothing in the Hawaiian Islands. Before Western exposure, native Hawaiians wore clothing that was suitable to the lifestyle and climate of the island chain. Both men and women wore brief lower garments made of *kapa*, a fabric made by felting fibers from the inside bark of the *wauke*, or paper mulberry tree. "It was tough, durable and versatile. It was great for clothing and made an excellent floor covering. And it was a joy to decorate" (Aloha). Men wore loincloths called *malo*, women wore a wrapped *kapa* garment of several layers called *pa'u*, and both occasionally wore capes during inclement weather. Since *kapa* cloth was often used as currency in early Hawaiian culture, making it was an important function that was performed for most families by women and girls.

Manufacturing *kapa* was a time consuming and arduous process, and the primary occupation for most women. The bark of the mulberry tree was first stripped and pounded, then dyed. Finally, the fine soft fabric was either hand painted, stenciled, or - using hand-carved wooden blocks - covered with unique geometric patterns in a wide range of colors made from natural dyes. This process was common throughout the islands of the South Pacific, however, many researchers believe that the women of Hawaii developed this craft to the most beautiful and highest levels.



Early. traditional tapa designs

Examples of kapa designs, sometimes also known as tapa.

Western style clothes were first introduced to the Hawaiian Islands when Captain Cook landed in 1778, but they did not become popular until the sandalwood trade between what was then known as The Sandwich Isles and the rest of the world developed in the earlier part of the next century. Initially only the *Ali'i*, or royalty, wore western style clothing, and only later in 1820 when Christian missionaries - who were offended by the amount of flesh exposed by traditional Hawaiian *kapa* garments - arrived, did common Hawaiian citizens begin to adopt western styles.

Unfortunately, the arrival of outsiders from Europe and the United States brought more than international trade in sandalwood and sugar. These merchants and sailors also brought diseases with them that, because of a lack of resistance, decimated the Hawaiian populace. At the beginning of the 1800's the entire population of the islands was almost entirely native Hawaiian, but within the first few decades of the nineteenth century the local native population was almost completely wiped out. A dramatic increase in agricultural trade, coupled with the extreme decrease in the local population, caused problems for plantation owners who needed workers to plant, harvest, and process sugar cane, pineapple, and coffee. The solution was to bring in workers from abroad. Many foreign workers came from

Germany and Portugal, but the majority of immigrants came from Asia. "Generally, Chinese immigration began in the 1850's, followed by the Portuguese in the late 1870's, Japanese in the late 1880's, and Koreans and Filipinos after 1900" (Brown and Arthur, p. 7).

The large scale immigration of workers from other countries brought about a radical change in the make up of the population. As time passed, intermarriage between native Hawaiians and these other various ethnic groups led to the extraordinary diversity found in Hawaii today. Fully one third of all marriages in Hawaii today are interracial. As a result, many people in Hawaii identify themselves in either one or both of two different ways: as a member of a specific ethnic group, or as "local" (Brown and Arthur, p. 9). In spite of the passage of time and a mixing of cultures, many people have retained aspects of their heritage(s) and actively participate in festivals, eat certain foods, and speak some of their ancestral languages. Examples include elaborate Lunar New Year celebrations in many Chinese households and *O-bon* dances and celebrations held during the summer months in communities throughout the islands. For many with multiple ethnic backgrounds, however, it is important to identify themselves as "local," and to be known as someone who comes from Hawaii rather than as being from a particular ethnic group.

One of the more visible symbols that help form this local identity is the aloha shirt. Its origins spring from a shared history among immigrants, and from blending a mix of materials from differing ethnic and cultural traditions. Plantation workers in the fields needed appropriate work clothing to protect them from the sharp, cutting edges of the sugar cane and pineapple plants, so they adapted a shirt brought to the islands by British sailors called frocks.

From the archives of the Kona Historical Society, worker wearing palaka shirt.

Because the Hawaiian language only has twelve letters (five vowels - a, e, i, o, and u, and seven consonants - h, k, l, m, n, p, and w), the word "frock" became *palaka.* These shirts were made of a tough,

durable cotton fabric and were constructed without tails, so it was not tucked into trousers, but rather worn loosely around the waist. Most *palaka* shirts were dark blue with a white plaid pattern, but occasionally they could be found in purple, red, or other colors as well. These *palakas* were the ancestors of the aloha shirt.

Blue Palaka shirt from Aloha Funwear.

In the early part of the twentieth century many women made *palakas* and other work clothes at home for their families, but later, custom tailor shops that specialized in making more formal clothing began to spring up in Honolulu and in plantation towns. Most of these shops were owned and operated by Asian immigrants (Schiffer p. 8) and carried a lot of fabric from their home countries, not only for their own use, but for sale to the general public as well. This made it easy

in those days to find Chinese silks and Japanese yukata and kimono fabrics at many shops throughout the islands.

There is no single designer responsible for the development of the aloha shirt, and no one knows actually who made the first one. In fact, it is not even possible to put an exact date on when the aloha shirt was born. There are theories that it may have been a Japanese mother who used scraps of kimono fabric to make a shirt for her young son, or that a Waikiki beachboy wanted something splashy to wear to a party (Schiffer, p. 29). Nobody really knows who it was, but in the late 1920's and early 1930's all the ingredients needed to make it happen were there in Honolulu: bright, colorful fabrics, talented seamstresses, and coconut shell buttons.

Musa-Shiya The Shirtmaker was one of these merchants who supplied fabrics for home sewing in the 1920's, and because of his poor English and his lack of understanding about overseas shipments and backorders, he had an excess of fabric for sale in his shop (Shiffer, p.9). To solve this dilemma he began to make ready-made shirts to sell in his shop. At this point in time, most of his shirts were "fine shirts" made of fine, British broadcloth, but some of his advertisements also included pictures of *happi* coats.

In the 1930's, however, the yard-goods most often available in Hawaii were silk prints, raw silk, cotton yukata and kimono cloth from Japan; Indonesian batiks from Java; and rayon from the United States mainland, and Musa-Shiya the Shirtmaker began to use these colorful fabrics for some of his ready-made shirts. He was not the only shirt-maker to do this, but on page seventeen in the June 28, 1935 edition of the Honolulu-Advertiser, he was the first shirt-maker to use the term "aloha shirts" in an advertisement. Many people believe that another shirt-maker, Ellery J. Chun, coined the term "aloha shirt," but in reality the term itself probably grew from local street talk, since the shirts were being made from Asian prints in the early 1930's (Schiffer, p. 17) and neither he, nor Musa-Shiya actually created the term. The common misconception that Mr. Chun created the expression probably stems from the fact that he registered the term "aloha shirt" in 1937. In a 1978 article for GQ magazine he said that because the King-Smith Store was doing well selling the shirts, "I figured it was a good idea to own the trademark." Musa-Shiya the Shirtmaker was not hurt by this turn of events, however, and his business grew, eventually evolving into the fabric store called Musashiya. The store is still in business, and if you like, it is possible to purchase fabric

from Mushashiya at their store in the Ala Moana Shopping Center in Honolulu (Beanteacher).

By the end of the 1930's tourism had begun to bring visitors to Hawaii, and the aloha shirt caught their attention. Tourists and servicemen stationed in Hawaii were attracted to the exotic look of these shirts, and many purchased them as gifts or souvenirs to remember their visit to the islands. Soon, people on the mainland, and in other countries were exposed to aloha shirts, and they soon became popular and well known icons of Hawaii. At this time,and up until World War II, "most aloha shirts were made with kimono fabrics of silk or kabe crepe, or of simple cotton broaddoth two color prints. The design motifs on the early 1930's aloha shirts were uniformly Asian and (the fabrics) were generally roller printed (in Asia), then imported into Hawaii" (Arthur, p.23).

In 1936 two clothing manufacturers set up factories specifically to produce casual sportswear. Because Hawaii still had a plantation economy and most residents operated on the lower end of the economic scale, both Branfleet and Kamehameha targeted tourists and mainland outlets for their goods, and continued to do so until World War II.

By 1937 other types of patternsin addition to the popular Asian designs, began to pop up on aloha shirts. A few long-sleeved aloha shirts made of drapery fabric with large-scale tropical designs started to appear, and two-color broadcloth prints with Hawaiian words and designs resembling "travel stickers" were also seen in shops and on the street.

Long sleeved aloha shirt with draperyfabric pattern.

During World War II shipping between the mainland and Hawaii was drastically curtailed, and it was extremely difficult to either import or export fabric or clothing. As a result, the local garment industry was forced to print their own fabrics in Hawaii. Before the war began, fabrics in Hawaii were sometimes screen printed, hand painted,

stenciled, or hand-block printed, but during the war they were the only ways to get the necessary designs.

Because of the shipping restrictions during World War II, imported clothing from the mainland or other countries was impossible to find. It was during this time that the local people began to wholeheartedly embrace the aloha shirt as everyday wear rather than just for special occasions, and that the larger clothing producers began to market to the local population with the same enthusiasm they had earlier shown for the export market.

For a while after the war, manufacturers used silk screen to print their designs onto fabric. The silk screening process made it possible for designers to print a large range of individual motifs on everything from the pocket of an already completed garment to bolts of uncut cloth (Brown and Arthur, pp. 26, 27). However, because of outside competition and the need for greater quantities of fabric, manufacturers eventually switched mainly to roller-printing. Most garment makers ordered roller-printed cloth from either the mainland or Japan.

Fabric designs and patterns took a great leap forward in both quantity and diversity after the war when high quality rayon was readily available. Early patterns were primarily influenced by traditional

Asian designs and colors, but now a whole new range of original aloha shirt styles began to show up more frequently. One of the most striking of the Hawaiian shirts is the border shirt. Designs were either centered in the middle of the front and the back of the shirt, or were "worked to the seams." Subordinate designs were also worked to the sides or around the bottom of the shirt, which is inspiration for the name "border shirt." Most designs are intricate or complicated, vertically oriented, and created to "take into account all the particular areas on a shirt" (Steele, p. 48). The finished product often looks like it has been printed directly onto a completed shirt so that the design continues unbroken over shirt panels, pockets, sleeves,and collars. Another popular design is often referred to as picture shirts. They incorporate photographs that are adapted to the photo-silkscreening process, and often appear to be photographs that were actually printed directly onto the fabric. Hawaiian scenes and people are the most common subjects. Diamond Head, the Aloha Tower, the Royal Hawaiian Hotel, hula girls, coconut boys, and net fishermen can often be seen in the photos used for this kind of shirt. Because of technical difficulties and cost, early picture shirts were generally one color photo-prints in either brown, green, blue, or red.

Label: **Duke Champion Kahanamoku Made by Cisco Unconditionally Washable.** Multi-color border print with Navy blue background and scene of Diamond Head viewed from inside a grove of graceful coconut palms. Rayon. Oyster shell buttons, two patch pockets. c. 1948. This is the same shirt design as the shirt worn by Montgomery Clift in the death scene of the 1954 movie *From Here To Eternity.*

Photo from Hawaiian Shirt Designs, by Nancy N. Schiffer, p.164.

Historic designs from the past are also an inspiration for fabric patterns. The geometric designs of the original hand painted and block printed *kapa* are commonly seen on aloha shirts. Often *kapa* prints stand on their own, but frequently they serve as the background pattern for other designs. It is not unusual to see a shirt with a *kapa* background behind a flower lei or picture postcard design.

Red squares of tapa design on a geometric background. Rayon. White Plastic buttons. Malibo Crepe. Courtesy of Dr. Cary L. Moss. Photo: Schiffer, p. 24.

At one point the demand for original, custom-made shirts was quite large, and manufacturers called upon famous designers (mostly from the mainland) to put their own spin on a Hawaiian print design (Steele, p. 60). The first of these famous creations was by Elsie Das, who was commissioned by Watumull's in 1936 to design a series of fifteen Hawaiian designs on raw silk. Her designs became very popular, and were purchased by famous movie stars like Ginger Rogers and Janet Gaynor who had them made into "seductive gowns" (*ibid*). Other famous designers or artists who either created designs for aloha wear or had their work adapted include Millie Briner for

Kamehameha Garments, Ethyl Wheeler for Oahu Garment Company, Eugene Savage, and John Meigs among many others.

The origin of the aloha shirt was possibly leftover yukata and kimono fabric, and Japanese designs continued to be popular as time passed. In the late 1940's it was particularly evident in silk and rayon yardage as fabric designs began to change. Tigers, eagles, and dragons were popular and Mount Fuji even replaced Diamond Head as a design favorite for a while.

Among the many designs that grace the fabrics of aloha shirts, perhaps the most endearing are those with Hawaiiana themes. "They celebrate all things Hawaiian whether they be fact or fiction, legend or lore" (Steele, p. 84). It is possible to study the history of Hawaii and the Hawaiian people in many of these shirts. Designs often incorporate maps of the island chain, likenesses of kings and queens from the past, or images of familiar landmarks. Hawaii's rich cultural heritage is often incorporated into the designs, and images of surfers, beachboys, lei ladies, and *paniola* cowboys are often featured. Hawaiiana aloha shirts are a joy to behold, and have a wistful feeling that is rarely found in other types of clothing.

The aloha shirt has a long history in modern fashion. Rarely does an article of clothing retain its popularity for such a long period of time

in a world where fashion changes so rapidly. Perhaps the reason for the popularity and longevity of the aloha shirt in Hawaii is because it is more than just a shirt. Its roots are based in both Eastern and Western cultures, and it is a highly visible symbol for people of different origins and backgrounds who wish to come together and to identify as "local." Not only that, but it is a functional, wearable, piece of art that reminds visitors of happy times they spent in the paradise called Hawaii.

Works Cited

Aloha Funwear.com, *History of Hawaiian Shirts and Hawaiian Clothing* http://www.alohafunwear.com/funfacts.shtml

Arthur, Linda B. Aloha Attire, Hawaiian Dress in the Twentieth Century. Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing Ltd., 2000.

Beanteacher.com - *Hawaiian Shirts - A Colorful History* http://www.beanteacher.com/pages/talkstoryfeatures/hawaiianshirthistory.htm

Brown, Desoto and Arthur, Linda. The Art of the Aloha Shirt Waipahu, Hawaii: Island Heritage Publishing, 2002.

Foster, Mary Howard. "*Hawaiian Style*," Honolulu Star-Bulletin, April 7, 1956, Magazine Section.

Steele, H. Thomas. The Hawaiian Shirt, Its Art and History New York/London, Abbeville Press, 1984.

Schiffer, Nancy N. Hawaiian Shirt Designs. Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing Ltd., 1995.

Schiffer, Nancy N. Hawaiian Shirts, Dress Right for Paradise. Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing Ltd. 2005.

Schweitzer, Veronica S. *The Aloha Shirt*. CoffeeTimes.com, http://www.coffeetimes.com/aloha.htm

Bibliography

Mauishirts.com, *A Brief History of the "Hawaiian Aloha Shirt,"* http://www.mauishirts.com/mauishirts/shirthistory.html.

Schiffer, Nancy N. Tropical Shirts and Clothing. Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing Ltd., 1998.